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DE RUEHLB #0466/01 1131918
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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4743
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3686
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3886
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000466

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/22/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORTY-FIVE DAYS AND COUNTING TO ELECTION
DAY

REF: A. BEIRUT DAILY MEDIA SUMMARY APRIL 21 2009

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 445

[1](#)C. BEIRUT 426

[1](#)D. BEIRUT 325

[1](#)E. BEIRUT 185

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Over the weekend of April 18-19, pro-opposition New TV aired footage of March 14 Druze leader Walid Jumblatt making comments criticizing his March 14 allies Samir Geagea and Saad Hariri, while simultaneously insulting all Maronite Christians and the Sunni fighters who battled Hizballah during the May 7, 2008 clashes in West Beirut. The episode caused a major stir in Lebanese politics, while the major March 14 Christian leaders -- Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel -- continued bickering over candidates for parliamentary seats. End summary.

JUMBLATT STEPS OFF THE RESERVATION
MARCH 14 STILL SQUABBLING

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a meeting with Druze clerics, Walid Jumblatt was recorded -- reportedly surreptitiously, on the cell phone of a meeting attendee -- making comments lambasting his March 14 allies (Ref A). He accused Lebanese Forces' leader Samir Geagea of working against his allies to "isolate" himself and his constituency, and referred to Geagea and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel as part of "a bad race," i.e., the Maronites. He described Future Movement Sunni leader Saad Hariri as "still new," and complained that the 1000 Future Party Sunnis who came to Beirut from Akkar in May 2008 to fight Hizballah "did not last 15 minutes." He suggested that the Christians and Sunnis had tried to push the Druze into a fight with the Shia. While Jumblatt later held a press conference on April 22 to try to explain his comments, he did not retract them. The video was leaked the weekend of April 18-19 and shown once on New TV, but was not aired again, though it made the rounds on YouTube. Most Lebanese we have spoken to have seen it.

[1](#)3. (C) Although Saad Hariri told us April 23 that Jumblatt

was still with the March 14 coalition (septel), others believe Jumblatt may be positioning himself for a shift. Jumblatt recently opined that "elections are an important phase, but more important is the post-election phase." He has expressed concern at Lebanon's polarization, and has promoted reconciliation as a means of avoiding Druze-Shia conflict.

14. (C) Meanwhile, the Christian March 14 leaders have continued to squabble over which of them will present candidates for parliamentary seats in certain key districts, and several well-respected candidates have been sidelined or have withdrawn as a result of the horse-trading. The April 17 withdrawal of prominent Christian March 14 figure Nassib Lahoud from the parliamentary race in the Metn was seen as a particularly hard blow to March 14 (Ref B).

REACTIONS TO THE MELTDOWN:
FROM FURY TO GLEE

15. (C) Many reacted angrily to Jumblatt's comments. Future MP Azzam Dandashi of Akkar spoke out publicly in defense of the offended youth of his region and called on Jumblatt to apologize. In an op-ed in Ad-Diyar newspaper, Editor-in-Chief Charles Ayoub was incredulous that Jumblatt's Maronite allies -- Geagea and Gemayel -- had not reacted to his insults. He attacked Jumblatt, asking, "Isn't the number of Christians you slaughtered during the war on the mountain enough?" In an April 21 dinner with the Ambassador, Kataeb MP Solange Gemayel was livid with Jumblatt and wondered aloud

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whether his comments were an intentional plot to blow apart March 14 once and for all. March 14 Finance Minister Mohammad Chatah told the Ambassador April 21 that Jumblatt had been preparing to "redraw the political lines" for some time, probably in an attempt to guarantee the survival of his Druze leadership and of his Druze community. "Regardless of the reasons," said Chatah, "it's bad."

16. (C) Reaction from the opposition was gleeful. In public statements April 20, Michel Aoun said, "We watch comfortably as the March 14 ranks grow weaker." On April 18, Ali Hamdan, senior advisor to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, laughed to EconOff about Jumblatt's criticisms of his allies, saying that while harshly presented, they were true: "I told General Aoun recently, you should keep Geagea and Gemayel around, make sure they get just a few seats, because you could not ask for more stupid opponents than they are."

FOCUS ON POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

17. (C) Finance Minister Chatah assessed that changing political currents may make traditional Lebanese polling and seat counting irrelevant, because various individuals and party blocs -- including Jumblatt's, as well as Tripoli heavyweights Najib Mikati and Mohammed Safadi -- could decide to ally with either side following the election. The central issue, according to Chatah, is not who wins or loses, but what kind of government will be formed after June 7: another national unity government, or a government based on majority rule (Ref D).

18. (C) He noted that the Hizballah-led opposition is calling for a unity government with full participation by all political and confessional groups, which Chatah believed would lead to the same paralysis seen in the current government, with no party accountable for the lack of government action. Such a system lends legitimacy to Hizballah, he said, and allows the group to act as it pleases, since its presence in the cabinet prevents the government from condemning its actions. Chatah believed it important that the new parliamentary majority form a government on its own, regardless of which side wins the

elections, to allow the opposition and the people to hold the government accountable. If Hizballah demands a unity government, said Chatah, it might be preferable at least to increase the number of ministers the president nominates (now 3 of the 30) to create a bloc of independent cabinet members large enough to overcome deadlock on controversial votes.

SECURITY PREPARATIONS IN PLACE

19. (C) As of mid-April, Statistics Lebanon polls predict 56 seats for March 14, 53 seats for March 8, and 19 undetermined. Another polling firm, Information International, predicts that the current opposition will take 61 seats and March 14 57 seats, with ten seats too close to call. With the competition close in several districts, there have been few instances of election-related violence so far. In an April 22 meeting with the Ambassador, International Security Forces (ISF) Commander General Ashraf Rifi said the ISF, coordinating with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), has completed comprehensive security preparations for election day. Rifi said he is particularly focused on Zahle, Tripoli (specifically, the Bab el-Tabaneh and Jabl Mohsen areas), and Sidon as sites where violence could break out. Rifi expects any security incidents to be localized, lasting no more than three or four days.

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